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Whistleblowing versus the code of silence: A qualitative analysis of athletes' perceptions of reporting doping in sport

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Objectives: This paper qualitatively explores national level athletes' perceptions of their role in keeping sport clean.

Design: A qualitative design was utilised to enable an in-depth examination of athletes' views on reporting doping behaviour.

Method: Following ethical approval, semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine national level athletes from rugby league (n = 5) and athletics (n = 4; female = 2). Thematic analysis established the main themes within the data.

Results: Contextual differences existed around the role that athletes perceived they would play in keeping sport clean. The track and field athletes indicated that they would adopt the role of a whistleblower whereas the rugby league players would adhere to a code of silence. Specifically, track and field athletes would report individuals who were doping in their sport although it was evident that the majority were unaware of the protocol for doing this. In comparison, the rugby league players highlighted a moral dilemma by suggesting they would refrain from reporting a team mate despite disagreeing with their actions.

Conclusions: Prevention programmes should enhance efforts to change broader group and community norms around doping in sport. In doing so, community members' receptivity to prevention messages may increase. Moreover, developing skills to intervene (i.e., speaking out against social norms that support doping behaviour) or increasing awareness of reporting lines could enhance community responsibility for clean sport. The findings highlight the need to consider the context of sport and emphasise that a one size fits all approach to anti-doping is not appropriate.